

PROSPECT: OR, VIEW OF THE MORAL WORLD.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 26, 1805.

NO. 4.

COMMENTS UPON THE SACRED WRITINGS OF THE JEWS AND CHRISTIANS.

BOOK OF LEVITICUS.

THOSE that have been denominated the privileged orders of the world, have generally been its robbers. Under the pretension of instructing and preserving mankind, they have either destroyed or rendered them extremely wretched. The clergy, in Europe, have subjugated nations, and in the name of God, and his holy religion, have purloined from the industrious poor, the fruits of their industry—so necessary to their comfort, tranquillity and existence. It is true that they have promised repayment in heaven, but if they should draw upon the Celestial Bank, it is an hundred to one if their Bills do not come back protested. This might be denominated spiritual swindling, and shows how religious credulity conducts man to poverty, wretchedness, and ruin, consoled only by the fallacious hope of receiving an ultimate reward, which fanaticism has no power to bestow. The Jewish priesthood were not inferior to any in the arts of clerical imposition; under the name of offering to the Lord, they taxed the people to any amount they pleased, and even carried their requisitions so far as to impose a fine upon individuals for actions of supposed criminality, concerning which the individual appears to have no consciousness. In proof of this assertion, it is only necessary to turn to the fifth chapter of this book, and the following passage will be found. *And if a soul sin, and commit any of these things which are forbidden to be done, by the commandments of the Lord; though he wist it not, yet he is guilty, and shall bear his iniquity. And he shall bring a ram without blemish out of the flock, with thy estimation for a trespass-offering unto the priest; and the priest shall make an atonement for him concerning his ignorance wherein he erred, and wist it not; and it shall be forgiven him. It is a trespass-offering; he hath certainly trespassed against the Lord.*—verses 17, 18, 19. This passage shows great incorrectness of ideas concerning the nature and character of moral principles. Criminality can attach only to designed and conscious wickedness. In any given action, where a man knows no better, nothing better could be expected from him, and he ought not to be punished for involuntary ignorance.

The seventh chapter of this book is replete with priestcraft, and clerical impositions, calculated on the one hand, to feast a privileged order, and on the other, to depress, degrade, and stupify the people. All this, however, Jews and Christians say, was done by the command of the Lord; and, of course, cannot be controverted, under the pain of everlasting damnation. Without, however, begging his lordship's pardon, we shall proceed to examine other parts of this book, and prove that it is destitute of moral and divine character. The thirteenth chapter presents us with a long and foolish story concerning leprosy, and a number of useless ceremonies, which bear no manner of relation

to a divine system of religion, to science, morality, or any thing else, that is of any use to mankind. The fifteenth chapter is replete with the most detestable indelicacy ; it is neither fit to be heard or to be read by any person. Read it, ye priests, to your polite and splendid assemblies, and they will return home disgusted with your impudent indelicacy ; read it, ye followers of Moses and of Jesus, and then ask yourselves the question, Whether such a bundle of filth and stupidity, ought to be called Holy Writ, and whether it has any of the characteristic features of a real revelation from God ?

TO THE EDITOR OF THE PROSPECT.

SIR,

You will oblige your Philadelphia subscribers, by publishing in the Prospect the following certified extract from the Docquet of the Court of Quarter Sessions for the County of Philadelphia. It ought to be published as a living evidence of the malignant disposition which the Christian religion infuses into its votaries. And what renders it more interesting at this time, is, that Joseph Lloyd, Esq. Attorney at Law, of this city, was this day arrested on the same charge (of Blasphemy) and bound in recognizance to appear at the next Mayor's Court to answer it.

A PHILADELPHIAN.

Philadelphia County, ss.

(SEAL.) At a Court of Quarter Sessions of the Peace, held at Philadelphia, for the County aforesaid, on Monday, the sixth day of March, Anno Domini one thousand eight hundred and two: Commonwealth

vs. } Cornelius Brown. } Blasphemy—true Bill.

Defendant being arraigned, pleads "*non cul*," &c.

Whereupon a Jury being called, come, to wit.—Elisha Thomas, Jacob Grace, Daniel Carteral, Jacob Walter, Michael Ash, James Mortough, Jacob Lesher, William Jones, Michael Katz, Joseph Sibby, Jacob Gardner, and John Boyle—who being duly empanelled, returned elected, by ballot, tried, chosen, and affirmed respectively, say, that the Defendant is guilty of the Blasphemy in manner and form as he stands indicted.

Judgment—that the Defendant forfeit and pay to the Guardians of the Poor of the City of Philadelphia, the sum of Ten Pounds, or undergo a servitude, for the term of three calender months, from this day, and, during that time, to be confined, kept at hard labour, fed, clothed, and treated as the law directs ; that he pay the costs of prosecution, and stand committed until this judgment is in all things complied with.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and affixed the seal of office, this twelfth day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and five.

JOS. REED, Clerk.

N. B. The above was obtained from the Clerk of the Quarter Sessions, as a document to accompany a Petition to the Legislature to repeal the law against Blasphemy, which is now in circulation here.

The words charged in the indictment, I am informed, were, swearing "by the frosty face of Jesus Christ"—the Defendant being a sailor.

A. P.

REMARKS.

THE subject of Blasphemy has been viewed in different points of light, in different countries; and the opinions of individuals in the same country, have been so diversified, that an enquiry into the nature of the case, and the character of Blasphemy, seems to have become extremely necessary. The ignorance, the timidity, and the superstition of man, have created a thousand spiritual phantoms which have no positive or real existence in nature; these frightful productions of the human imagination are, however, very highly estimated by their legitimate progenitors. The more distorted the object of adoration is, the more it seems to excite the pious affection of its devoted victim. Fanaticism and folly are always the concomitants of false religions; and when once the human mind is subjugated and placed completely under the dominion of superstition, reason loses all the energy of its character, and the moral world becomes a chaos of ignorance, vice, and misery. It is amidst this general darkness that hot-headed, religious enthusiasm sets about the business of protecting the phantoms of its own creation. This must be done either by civil or ecclesiastical law, annexing a terrifying penalty to each violation. But who is this law to protect? The answer to this would be different in different countries; and even among the sectaries professing substantially the same religion. Among the Christians, the Trinitarians would contend for a law which should cover over the sublime and mysterious doctrine of the Trinity, and guard the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost against human outrage and profane obloquy. Among Arrians and Socinians, the law would go only to protect Jehovah himself, leaving the Son and Holy Ghost to shift for themselves, and defend their character in the best manner they can. We do not mean to insinuate here that the Arrians and the Socinians have no regard to the character of Jesus; on the contrary, it is true that the Arrians ascribe to him a superangelic nature, and the Socinians consider him as a mere man, endowed with extraordinary gifts and graces, and both view him as an agent from God, to restore a lost world to Divine favour. These sectaries do not wish for a law to protect the character of Jesus against Blasphemy, and as to the Holy Ghost, they have dismissed him entirely, and thrown him out of their spiritual service. Thus Christians themselves would be unable to agree upon the persons or beings whose character the law of Blasphemy ought to protect. The most numerous and ruling sectaries, however, regulate this matter as they please; and subjecting, at the same time, all other sectaries to the unjust criminations of their spiritual tyranny. In countries not professing the Christian religion, another and distinct class of spiritual idols are set up as objects of adoration, and of course, all these *blasphemous laws*, as they ought to be called, go to the point of guarding their character, such as it is, against the slanderous insults of all those who come under their jurisdiction. The character of Mahomet is as sacred in Turkey, as that of Jesus is among the Christians. Zoroaster commands the adoration of the Persian world, and his character there is profoundly sacred. Pen-

trate into the Indies, and you will find the sacred name of Fot, commanding the adoration of millions, and it would be blasphemy there to speak against his Divinity. The same remark, in spirit and principle, will apply to all the sublime and dignified phantoms of all the other nations of the earth. But the advocates for the laws of Blasphemy will say, that there is one supreme God, and that his character ought to be protected, whatever may be said concerning the inferior Divinities. But it may be answered, who gave to legislators on earth, the right and the power of making laws concerning the character of the Creator? Is he not fully competent to protect his own character, without recourse to the malignant and persecuting arm of human flesh? Yes, and there is no man, or set of men, on earth, that has a right to make laws respecting the religious opinions of individuals—let those opinions be what they will. The laws should take cognizance only of immoral actions, leaving to each individual the absolute right of modifying his theological ideas according to the best judgment which human reason can form upon the subject. Whoever is not sufficiently civil to the Divinity he adores, must look to that matter himself, and settle the dispute in the best manner he can. Let legislators look to the morals, the science, and the virtues of society—with theology they have nothing to do; it is beyond the sphere of their jurisdiction.

Of all the tyrannies that afflict mankind, tyranny in religion is the worst. Every other species of tyranny is limited to the world we live in; but this attempts a stride beyond the grave, and seeks to pursue us into eternity. It is there and not here, it is to God, and not to man, it is to a heavenly, and not to an earthly tribunal, that we are to account for our belief; if, then, we believe falsely and dishonourably of the Creator, and that belief is forced upon us, as far as force can operate, by human laws and human tribunals, on whom is the criminality of that belief to fall; on those who impose it, or on those whom it is imposed?

A bookseller of the name of Williams has been prosecuted in London on a charge of blasphemy, for publishing a book entitled the Age of Reason: blasphemy is a word of vast sound, but of equivocal and almost indefinite signification; unless we confine it to the simple idea of hurting or injuring the reputation of any one, which was its original meaning. As a word, it existed before Christianity existed, being a Greek word, or Greek anglofied, as all the etymological dictionaries will shew.

But behold how various and contradictory has been the signification and application of this equivocal word; Socrates, who lived more than four hundred years before the Christian era, was convicted of blasphemy for preaching against the belief of a plurality of Gods, and for preaching for the belief one God, and was condemned to suffer death by poison; Jesus Christ was convicted of blasphemy, under the Jewish law, and was crucified. Calling Mahomet an impostor would be blasphemy in Turkey; and denying the infallibility of the Pope and the Church, would be blasphemy at Rome. What then is to be understood by this word blasphemy? We see that in the case of Socrates, truth was condemned as blasphemy. Are we sure that

truth is not blasphemy in the present day? Woe, however, be to those who make it so, whoever they may be.

A book called the bible, has been voted by men, and decreed by human laws to be the word of God, and the disbelief of this is called blasphemy. But if the bible be not the word of God, it is the laws, and the execution of them that is blasphemy, and not the disbelief. Strange stories are told of the Creator in that book. He is represented as acting under the influence of every human passion, even of the most malignant kind. If these stories are false, we err in believing them to be true, and ought not to believe them. It is therefore a duty, which every man owes to himself and reverentially to his Maker, to ascertain by every possible enquiry, whether there be a sufficient evidence to believe them or not.

PAINE.

The preceding remarks shew in what point of light the subject of blasphemy ought to be viewed by every man who reasons upon correct and natural grounds. There is, however, one further consideration, which ought to be taken into the present enquiry. The bible is believed by Christians to be a revelation from God; they affirm that the whole of it was given by inspiration; that God himself was the dictator of it, and of course, it necessarily follows that he would not disclose any ideas in that book, inconsistent with the dignity and purity of his own character. If, however, there can be any such thing as blasphemy against the attributes and perfections of the Creator, it may be found in the following passages of the melancholy and ill-natured Jeremiah.

"He was unto me as a bear lying in wait, and as a lion in secret places. He hath turned aside my ways, and pulled me in pieces, he hath made me desolate. He hath bent his bow, and set me as a mark for the arrows. He hath caused the arrows of his quiver to enter into my reins. I was a derision to all my people, and their song all the day. He hath filled me with bitterness, he hath made me drunken with wormwood. He hath also broken my teeth with gravel stones, he hath covered me with ashes."—Lamentations, ch. 3d, ver. 10, &c.

If blasphemy consists in a scurrilous and indecent abuse of the character of God, here is blasphemy with a witness. This passage ascribes to the Creator all the ferocity of the wild beasts of the forest; "He was unto me as a bear lying in wait, and as a lion in secret places."—Will believers in this book have the effrontery to contend that their God is really possessed of those abominable and ferocious qualities? Will they presume to affirm that he commits an assault and battery upon an unfortunate man, by stuffing his mouth with gravel stones, and covering him with ashes? It is high time that those who are so very tenacious of the character of Jehovah, should re-examine the sentiments contained in the Bible, and henceforth be very cautious in the charges which they bring against Deists upon this subject. True Deists are the only religious sectary who hold in high veneration the moral attributes of the Supreme Being. The Bible traduces and calumniates his nature, and ascribes to the preserver of the Universe, properties and actions that would disgrace any good man on earth. In the book called the Psalms of David, there are many other passages similar to that which is here quoted from Jeremiah; in short, one half of this book which the Christian world estimates so highly, and which

is presumed to be a true revelation, represents the character of God in a most odious point of light. Anger, revenge, and cruelty, with all the other detestable passions that corrode the breast of mortals, are said at different times to have been exercised by him in the most unjust, and unreasonable manner. Believers! you must make your theism more pure, and give to your Bible Divinity a better character, or cease to calumniate those who contend for the immutable laws of nature, and who wish by all their efforts to present the indestructible energies of the Supreme Being in the most dignified and perfect point of light. Odious descriptions of God vitiate the moral powers of man; they corrupt the temperament of his heart, and by imitating bad examples, he becomes wicked and revengeful, himself. It would be better to begin at the root, and by purifying genuine theism from the superstitious dross of theology, a foundation would be laid for a splendid example, which would lead man to virtue and to happiness.

Two men travelling on the highway, the one east, the other west, can easily pass each other, if the way be broad enough. But two men, reasoning upon opposite principles of religion, cannot so easily pass without shocking; though one should think that the way were also, in that case, sufficiently broad, and that each might proceed without interruption in his own course. But such is the nature of the human mind, that it always takes hold of every mind that approaches it; and as it is wonderfully fortified and corroborated by an unanimity of sentiments, so it is shocked and disturbed by any contrariety. Hence the eagerness which most people discover in a dispute; and hence their impatience of opposition, even in the most speculative and indifferent opinions.

This principle, however frivolous it may appear, seems to have been the origin of all religious wars and divisions. But as this principle is universal in human nature, its effects would not have been confined to one age, and to one sect of religion, did it not there concur with other more accidental causes, which raise it to such a height as to produce the greatest misery and devastation. Most religions of the ancient world arose in the unknown ages of the government, when men were as yet barbarous and uninstructed, and the prince, as well as peasant, was disposed to receive with implicit faith, every pious tale or fiction, which was offered him. The magistrate embraced the religion of the people, and entering cordially into the care of sacred matters, naturally acquired an authority in them, and united the ecclesiastical with the civil power. But the Christian religion arising, while principles directly opposite to it were firmly established in the polite part of the world, who despised the nation who broached this novelty; no wonder that, in such circumstances, it was but little countenanced by the civil magistrate, and that the priesthood were allowed to engross all the authority in the new sect. So bad a use did they make of this power, even in those early times, that the persecutions of Christianity may, perhaps, in part, be ascribed to the violence instilled by them into their followers; though it must not be dissembled that there were laws against external superstition among the Romans, as ancient as the time of the twelve tables; and the Jews as well as Christians were

sometimes punished by them ; though, in general, these laws were not rigorously executed. Immediately after the conquest of Gaul, they forbade all but the natives to be initiated into the religion of the Druids ; and this was a kind of persecution. In about a century after this conquest, the Emperor Claudius, quite abolished that superstition by penal laws ; which would have been a very grievous persecution, if the imitation of the Roman manners had not, before hand, weaned the Gauls from their ancient prejudices. (*Suetonius in vita Claudii.*) Pliny ascribes the abolition of Druid superstitions to Tiberius, probably because that Emperor had taken some steps towards restraining them. This is an instance of the usual caution and moderation of the Romans in such cases ; and very different from their violent and sanguinary method of treating the Christians. Hence we may entertain a suspicion, those furious persecutions of Christianity were in some measure owing to the imprudent zeal and bigotry of the first propagators of that sect ; and ecclesiastical history affords us many reasons to confirm this suspicion. After Christianity became the established religion, the principles of priestly government continued ; and engendered a spirit of persecution, which has ever since been the poison of human society, and the source of the most inveterate factions in every government. There is another cause (besides the authority of the priests, and the separation of the ecclesiastical and civil powers) which has contributed to render Christendom the scene of religious wars and divisions. Religions, that arise in ages totally ignorant and barbarous, consist mostly of traditionary tales and fictions, which may be very different in every sect, without being contrary to each other ; and even when they are contrary, every one adheres to the tradition of his own sect, without much reasoning and disputation. But as philosophy was widely spread over the world at the time when Christianity arose, the teachers of the new sect were obliged to form a system of speculative opinions ; to divide with some accuracy their articles of faith ; and to explain, comment, confute, and defend, with all the subtlety of argument and science. Hence naturally arose keenness in dispute, when the Christian religion came to be split into new divisions and heresies. And this keenness assisted the priests in their policy, of begetting a mutual hatred and antipathy among their deluded followers. Sects of philosophy, in the ancient world, were more zealous than parties of religion ; but in modern times, parties of religion are more furious and enraged than the most cruel factions that ever arose from interest and ambition. The civil wars which arose some years ago in Morocco between the blacks and whites, merely on account of their complexion, are founded on a pleasant difference. We laugh at them ; but were things rightly examined, we afford much more occasion of ridicule to the Moors. For what are all the wars of religion which have prevailed in this polite and knowing part of the world ? They are certainly more absurd than the Moorish civil wars. The difference of complexion is a sensible and real difference : But the difference about an article of faith, which is utterly absurd and unintelligible, is not a difference in sentiment, but a difference in a few phrases and expressions, which one party accepts of without understanding them, and the other refuses in the same manner.

EVERY one asks, what is truth or evidence? The root of the word indicates the idea we ought to annex to it. Evidence is derived from *videre*. What is an evident proposition? It is a fact of which all may convince themselves by the testimony of their senses, and whose existence they may moreover verify every instant. Such are these two facts, *two and two make four; the whole is greater than a part.* If I pretend, for example, that there is in the north sea a polypus named Kraken, and that this polypus is as large as a small island; this fact, though evident to me, if I have seen and examined it with all the attention necessary to convince me of its reality, is not even probable to him who has not seen it; it is more rational in him to doubt my veracity, than to believe the existence of so extraordinary an animal. But if, after travellers, I describe the true form of the buildings at Pekin, this description, evident to those who inhabit them, is only more or less probable to others; so that the true is not always evident, and the probable is often true. But in what does evidence differ from probability? Evidence is a fact that is subject to our senses, and whose existence all men may verify every instant. As to probability, it is founded on conjectures, on the testimony of men, and on a hundred proofs of the same kind. Evidence is a single point; there are no degrees of evidence. On the contrary, there are various degrees of probability, according to the difference, first, of the people who assert; secondly, of the fact asserted. Five men tell me they have seen a bear in the forests of Poland: this fact not being contradicted by any thing, is to me very probable. But if not five only, but five hundred men, should assure me they met in the same forests ghosts, fairies, demons, their united evidence would not be to me at all probable; for in cases of this nature, it is more common to meet with five hundred romancers, than to see such prodigies.

HELVETIUS.

THE first priests were probably botanists, chymists, physicians, natural philosophers, and astronomers. These performed cures, showed wonders, and were in the rank of those impostors who, under the name of conjurors, continue to deceive the world. The poets took up the principles and actions of these men; personified some of them; and referred those they could not understand, to the operations of invisible powers, with whom the impostors pretended to converse, and whose messengers and delegates they were supposed to be. These invisible beings, once introduced into the system of nature, and being supposed to cure diseases, to perform miracles, and to foretel events, men were soon prevailed upon, not only to consign their health and fortunes to their direction, but even their understandings and senses; and to receive rules from them for the conduct of life, which could only be derived from those senses and understandings: rules which gradually deviated from the effects of experience, until all attention was transferred from experience to the priest, and religion was set in opposition to morality.

WILLIAMS.

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